

Heirloom Lilacs

BY G. H. GIFFORD III

Breathe deeply in late spring on the Miles Standish Shore in Duxbury, Massachusetts, and a heady, floral scent will drown out the salty bite of the sea. Look amid the rough native scrub, and you'll be greeted by purple buds bursting into glorious panicles of lavender-gray flowers. Lilacs. But these are special lilacs. Not the fancy hybrids bearing the names of wealthy dowagers and plant-breeders' daugh-

ters, but mere commoners—*Syringa vulgaris*—the common purple lilac. What distinguishes them is not their beautiful color or wealth of bloom but their fortitude. They have flowered for nearly 400 years in Duxbury and may be the oldest lilacs in America.

Lilacs have always had a strong following among garden enthusiasts. From the mid-1800s to the present, plant breeders have responded with many attractive new varieties sport-

The lilacs planted in the early 1600s by Mayflower passenger Elder William Brewster still bloom on the shores of Duxbury, Massachusetts. Photograph by Samuel W. Pillsbury, courtesy of Katherine H. Pillsbury, Duxbury Town Historian.

ing fanciful traits. Those on Miles Standish Shore are not among them. They are known as the Brewster Lilacs, because Elder William Brewster (1567-1644), one of the

Mayflower passengers, reportedly had them sent from Holland soon after his arrival in the New World.

Could the same shrub planted 370 years ago live into the modern age? If they are lilacs, yes. Lilacs are hardy plants—not invasive, but tenacious. They often survive after those who planted them are long gone. Our ancestors, who desired lilacs in the New World for the same reason they were grown in the Old, brought the plant with them just as they did the other necessities of life: tools, clothing, and seeds for the garden.

Grown for its aesthetic qualities—both beauty and aroma—the lilac was never relegated to the field but always cultivated in pleasure gardens throughout America, often near the doorstep so the scent could drift in windows and add an extra welcome to comings and goings. As a result, when we find lilacs growing in “vacant land” (a current term), the remains of an old home site are likely nearby. This is the case with the Brewster Lilacs.

“Upon the death of Governor Carver, Elder William Brewster took over as the religious leader of the Pilgrims,” explains Katherine Pillsbury, Duxbury’s town historian. “Later, along with Miles Standish and John Alden, he received a grant for land in Duxbury, across Kingston Bay.” Duxbury plant historian Dorothy Kelso writes in *Old Colony Wildflowers* (The Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, 2001): “According to local tradition, Pilgrim Brewster set a stand of lilacs at the door of his Duxbury home in 1634. ... The Lilacs persisted, standing beside crumbling foundation stones, a little walkway with steps, and the remains of an 18th-century well.”

Brewster left no journal of his botanical efforts, so no definitive document proves this legend. But old land records confirm the property once belonged to Elder Brewster. The land has a depression where a house foundation once existed, and lilacs still grow nearby.



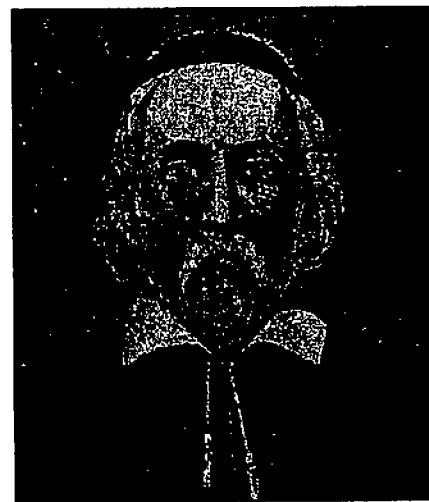
A watercolor of William Brewster's manor house in Scrooby, Nottinghamshire, England, where he lived from 1588-1608, shows what looks to be a tree of white lilacs on the right. Elizabeth M. Chettle's illustration is shown in *The American Pilgrim's Way in England*, published in 1907 by the Fine Art Society of London.

This likeness of William Brewster carries the notation “copyright 1904 by A. S. Burbank, Plymouth.” The image appears in the book *The Romantic Story of the Mayflower Pilgrims, and its Place in the Life of To-Day*, by Albert Christopher Addison (1911).

Lilacs have a tendency to “sucker,” to sprout new twiggy growth from their base each year. Those familiar with their care try to take advantage of this characteristic by annually pruning out the old woody stems and allowing the young suckers to mature. This ensures a crop of new growth each year and keeps the height of the blossoms at a desirable low level. It also helps keep lilacs from developing a “leggy” habit.

With successive generations of suckers, an unattended plant will colonize an area and spread. As the parent plant grows old and dies, the expanding cluster of young lilacs will move toward less crowded locations. Since these new offspring are the result of natural asexual propagation, they are genetic replicas—clones—of the original plant. The Brewster Lilacs that have colonized on Duxbury’s Miles Standish Shore are the continuing growth of the originals Elder William Brewster planted in the early 1600s.

That the Brewster Lilacs have endured so long is a tribute to the



hardiness of their particular genetic makeup. “What we call the Miles Standish Shore is really a peninsula,” Pillsbury says. Kelso adds, “It’s a very exposed site, even for hardy lilacs.” A 1910 photograph shows the lilacs to be tired and damaged after hundreds of years along the harsh New England coast. Bedraggled shrubs as they may be, they remain, clones of Brewster’s lilacs and growing in the same soil where he first planted them.



The common lilac is included in a broad group called "heirloom plants"—grown and cherished today because our ancestors cherished them. European colonists brought them across the ocean as tangible traces of the lives they left behind. They worked for them as they do for us—conjuring memories of our own past, perhaps a childhood play area or grandmother's garden.

As with the Pilgrims, lilacs are transplants to North America. Of the twenty-four species here, two came from Europe and the rest originated in Asia. Our common lilac is native to the Southeast region of Europe and has been cultivated since the 1500s.

Although we lack direct written evidence that Elder Brewster introduced his lilacs during America's early settlement, we can trace the history of lilacs in America to colonial

times. We know that Thomas Jefferson was growing lilacs in Monticello's gardens because on April 2, 1767, he wrote in his Garden Book: "planted lilac, Spanish broom, Umbrella, Laurel." Unfortunately, Jefferson's lilacs no longer exist.

The only rivals with the Brewster Lilacs for the designation as the oldest living lilac colony in North America may be those growing on Mackinac Island in Michigan. There huge specimens display trunks exceeding 20 inches in diameter. French Jesuit missionaries reportedly planted them in the mid-1600s, making them a couple decades younger than Elder Brewster's horticultural endeavors.

Another stand of historic lilacs grows in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Around 1750, Governor Benning Wentworth planted lilacs by a new council

Mature lilac bushes, among the oldest in America, frame the Chateau La Framboise on Mackinac Island, Michigan, first settled by Europeans in 1671. Captain Benjamin Pierce, brother of future president Franklin Pierce, built the home for his mother-in-law, Madame Magdelaine La Framboise, in 1820. The daughter of a French-Canadian fur trader and an Ottawa woman, Magdelaine married Joseph La Framboise, who became the island's wealthiest fur trader. Despite his death in 1806, she continued to successfully manage the business, retiring to her chateau in 1822.

OPPOSITE From the porch of the chateau, now the Harbour View Inn, guests can enjoy a breathtaking view of the water and the lilacs in bloom. Photographs courtesy of the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau.

chamber he'd built at his home. Hundreds of lilac enthusiasts visit offspring of those original flowers each year at the historic Wentworth-Coolidge property.

A visit to one of these stands of historic lilacs will be a memorable experience. Scent has a direct link to the brain cells that control memories. When we're dealing with a fragrance as delightful as that of a lilac, there's little doubt that the memories released will be just as delightful.

OWNING AN HEIRLOOM LILAC

You can acquire an heirloom lilac in one of two ways. The first is straightforward—buy one. Should you choose to buy a lilac from a local nursery, be sure the proprietors know whether they sell any of the old varieties. If they don't know, ask for the names of the varieties they offer, then research those varieties at your local library or on-line.

Visit the nursery when lilacs are in bloom, particularly if you are

picky about blossom colors. Written descriptions help, but it's often difficult to describe color subtleties by word. Even the older varieties come in several shades of blue, purple, and white.

Such a visit will also teach you other distinguishing traits of heirlooms. Although old lilacs are known for their fragrance, some varieties, such as 'Marie Legraye', a white lilac introduced in 1879, are considered more heavily scented than others. Another, 'Lucie Balter', introduced in 1888, has single blossoms with copper buds that open to coral pink. If your nursery has a good selection, you should find old varieties with double or single florets, large or small trusses, and varying growth rates.

The other method of acquiring an heirloom lilac will please both the parsimonious and those with sentimental tendencies—find an old plant and dig up a piece. (Be sure to ask for the permission of the plant's

4/6
owner first, and don't go digging in parks without the assent of the authorities.) Although you can't be picky about the specific variety you'll get, you'll have a special emotional connection to the plant that you can't purchase at a nursery. An acquaintance of mine paid an unannounced visit to the ancestral home of her great-grandmother, a house that had not been in her family for years. She boldly knocked on the front door and asked if she could please dig a small sucker from the huge lilac out front. Her efforts yielded her "great-grandmother's lilac"—and a new friend.

Lilacs are easy to move and usually flourish when transplanted as long as you dig them when they are dormant. That is, when they have no leaves—either in the early spring before their leaf buds break, or in the fall after they've dropped their leaves. Use a sharp spade so you can cleanly cut through the root when you dig them up, then follow the



typical transplanting instructions for moving a deciduous shrub in your climate zone. Most healthy old lilacs will provide a number of suckers to choose from.

Don't be overzealous and attempt to dig a large one. You'll have better success with a small sucker, since its root structure will be easy to lift intact, with an ample clump of moist soil. Moreover, when wrestling with a large sucker, you are more likely to damage the parent plant. Regardless of size, the lilac will grow quickly.

LILAC CARE

In 1821, William Cobbett published the following passage in his book *The American Gardener*: "Lilac – Desirable for its great masses of fine large bunches of bloom. There is the White, the Blue, and the Reddish. It is propagated from suckers, of which it sends out too many, and from which it should be kept clear as possible. It is an ugly shrub when out of bloom. The leaves soon become brown. Therefore, there should be but few Lilacs in a shrubbery."

Although many of us could not

survive a spring with just a few lilacs in our shrubbery, Corbett's comment does emphasize one important point: If your lilacs don't bloom, there's not much reason to grow them. So the first rule in cultivating lilacs is to provide them with plenty of sunlight. Give them full sun "... for at least two thirds of the day," writes Father John Fiala in his remarkably thorough book *Lilacs: The Genus Syringa* (Timber Press, 1988). "They will sulk and refuse to set flower buds well if relegated to a place in the shadows."

The second rule is to plant them in well-drained, rich soil. You will never find an old lilac growing in an area that has slow drainage. Water them well, particularly during the first year they are planted, and provide a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch. Lilacs bloom on new growth rather than set their flower buds in the fall like azaleas or apples. An abundant display of blossoms comes from new spring growth.

Lastly, you may want to document your new heirloom. If you don't keep a garden journal, tack a plant tag to the side of a sturdy lilac trunk. On it

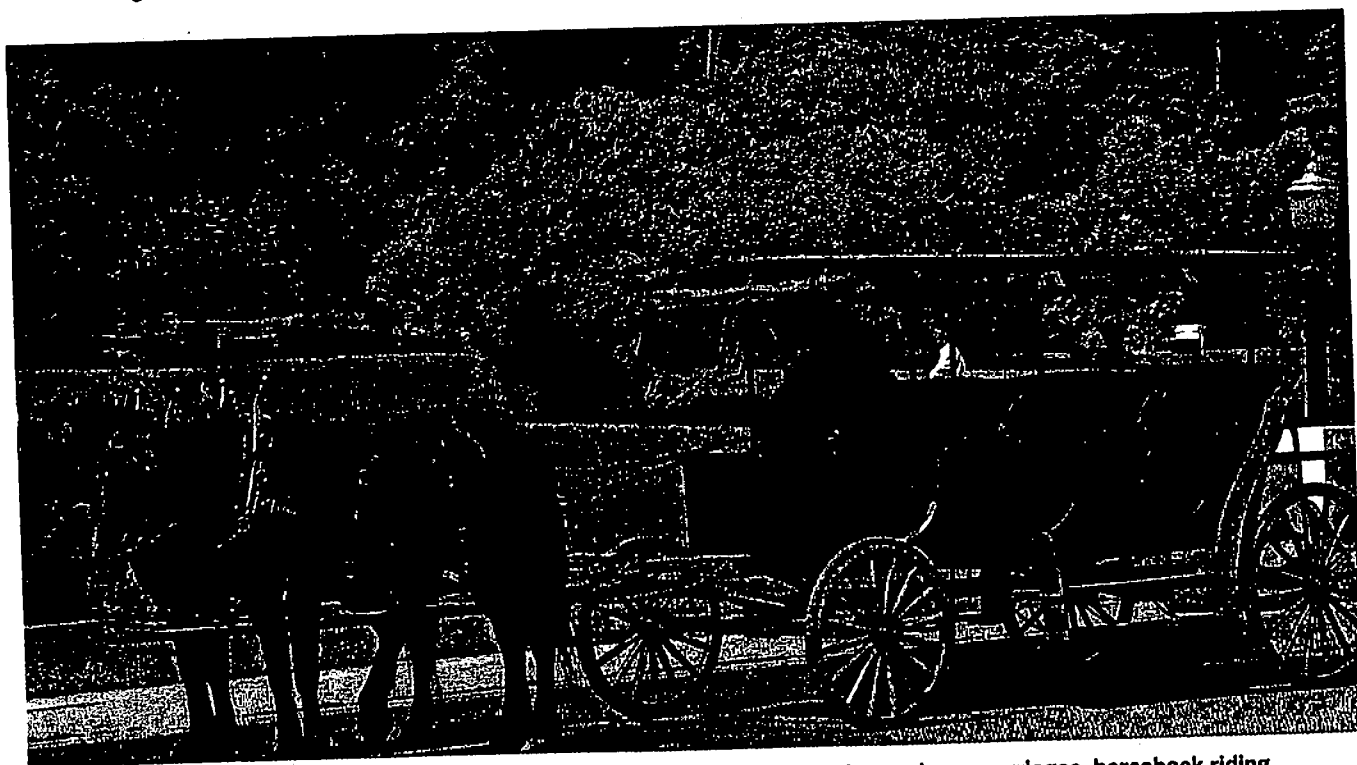
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record an abbreviated history of your heirloom. Your gardening descendants will appreciate the effort. Should your lilac survive 370 years, you won't want to have made the same mistake as Elder William Brewster. *

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SOURCE

The International Lilac Society was formed in 1971 to stimulate interest in the genus *Syringa* and to promote its use in public and private landscaping. Among its goals are to assist nurseries in providing the most desirable lilac cultivars and specimens, to maintain disease-free lilac stock, and to accurately identify lilac hybrids and cultivars. For membership information:

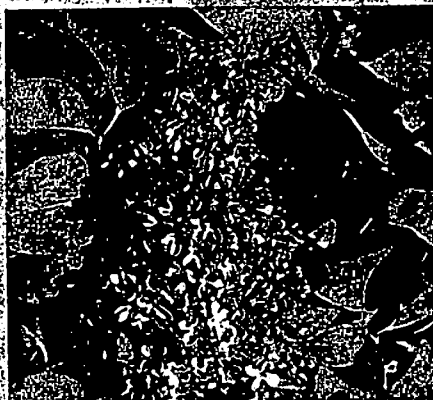
David Gressley
The Holden Arboretum
9500 Sperry Road
Kirtland, OH 44094
440.946.4400
www.holdenarb.com



Mackinac Island restricts automobiles, so transportation is by real horsepower—horse-drawn carriages, horseback riding, pony rides, and a horse-drawn taxi service. Courtesy of the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau.

Boston's Arnold Arboretum includes a lilac collection of more than 500 plants representing about 230 different species and cultivars. The International Lilac Society holds its 2005 convention here May 12-15, with the Lilac Festival on May 15.

The Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University
125 Arborway
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130-3500
617.524.1718
www.arboretum.harvard.edu/plants/lilac_intro.html



The Centennial Lilac Garden in Niagara Falls, Ontario, was founded in 1967 in commemoration of Canada's Centennial Year. The 10-acre collection contains more than 1,200 plants of 200 different lilac cultivars. Anticipated bloom time is late May to mid-June.

The Niagara Parks Commission
Box 150
Niagara Falls, Ontario
L2E 6T2
www.niagaraparks.com

Eureka College, established in 1855, has a variety of gardens including the Lilac Arboretum. More than a century ago, graduates began a tradition of sending lilac varieties back to the campus from abroad. At one time the site had nearly 100 varieties, and efforts to revitalize the garden through the Lilac Festival and Fine Arts Faire includes planting new varieties every spring. This year's event is April 29-30.

City of Eureka Tourism Office
128 North Main Street
Eureka, IL 61530
309.467.6123
www.eurekaliacs.com

Highland Park in Rochester, New York, draws more than half a million people to its century-old Lilac Festival; this year's dates are May 13-22. Highland Park, designed by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, has a collection of more than 500 cultivars of lilacs.

Highland Park
171 Reservoir Avenue
Rochester, NY 14620
716.256.4967
www.lilacfestival.com

The Holden Arboretum in Kirklund, Ohio, encompasses approximately 3,500 acres with 800 acres under cultivation. The site grows some 300 different Syringa cultivars. The Display Garden features lilacs that bloom in early May, depending upon the cultivar and the weather.

The Holden Arboretum
9500 Sperry Road
Kirklund, OH 44094
440.946.4400
www.holdenarb.com

Hulda Klager Lilac Gardens, a National Historic Site in Woodland, Washington, preserves the lilac cultivars developed by the woman known as "The Lilac Lady." The annual Lilac Festival begins in April and ends on Mother's Day—call for opening dates and times.

Hulda Klager Lilac Gardens
P.O. Box 828
Woodland, WA 98674
360.225.8996
www.lilacgardens.com

The Katie Osborne Lilac Dell, located within Canada's Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton, Burlington, Ontario, contains approximately 800 lilac varieties, one of the largest lilac collections in the world. Bloom time is about the third week in May.

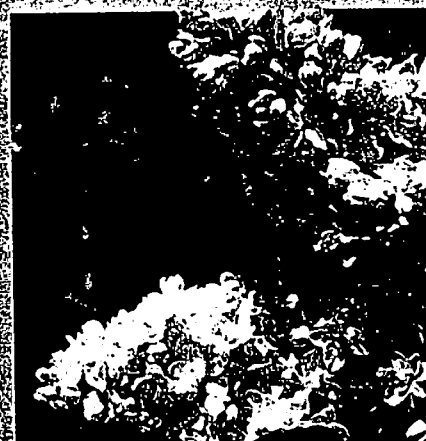
Royal Botanical Gardens
P.O. Box 399
Hamilton, Ontario
L8N 3J8
905.527.1158 ext. 250

Mackinac Island in Michigan is home to a colony of lilacs that are believed to be among the oldest living specimens in North America. Since 1949, the community has celebrated the arrival of summer with its annual Lilac Festival. The dates this year are June 10-19.

Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau
P.O. Box 451
Mackinac Island, MI 49757
800.454.5227
www.mackinacisland.org

The McLaughlin Foundation was founded in 1996 to preserve the home and garden of the late Bernard McLaughlin, a long-standing member of the International Lilac Society. The garden, in South Paris, Maine, hosts a Lilac Celebration on May 28-30.

The McLaughlin Garden
97 Main Street
South Paris, ME 04281
207.743.8820
www.mclaughlingarden.org



The Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion Historic Site supports the former home of New Hampshire's first royal governor, Benning Wentworth, who served from 1741-67. Wentworth planted lilacs near his 40-room mansion overlooking Little Harbor. They continue to bloom every year. This year's Lilac Festival is May 22.

Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion Historic Site
375 Little Harbor Road
Portsmouth, NH 03801
603.436.6607
www.nhstateparks.org/ParksPages/WentworthCoolidge/WentCoolHom.html